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## Remont: housing adaptation as meaningful practice of space production in post-Soviet Tajikistan

WLADIMIR SGIBNEV\*

### Abstract

*The proposed paper deals with multiple facets of the notion of remont, exploring urban space production in contemporary Tajikistan. Remont has come to bear in the post-Soviet Tajik context a wide range of meaning, in some way parallel to a Lefebvrian tripartite understanding of the production of space: Remont as perception refers to a good or a bad state of upkeep. Remont as conception refers to the desire to attain a certain remont status. Remont as adaptation refers to the activity being undertaken to reach this status. In this regard, remont is not only about attending to shortcomings, but is an active engagement with space, and a culturally embedded creative practice, aimed at reaching a normative set of spatial morality. I argue that the measure against which the need for remont is weighted, is obodi – beauty and habitability created by men's hands. By means of remont, obodi is being enacted in Tajikistan's urban space. Being a vector of spatial morality, remont is intimately tied to life-cycle rituals such as circumcisions, weddings and funerals, and thus takes part in projections and negotiations of modernity in post-Soviet urban Central Asia.*

Remont, Central Asia, Tajikistan, spatial morality, life-cycles

### Zusammenfassung

#### **Remont: Anpassung des Wohnraums als Praxis der Raumproduktion im postsowjetischen Tadschikistan**

*Die vorliegende Arbeit behandelt die verschiedenen Facetten des Begriffs „remont“ und befasst sich in diesem Zusammenhang mit der Schaffung von urbanem Raum im modernen Tadschikistan. „Remont“ hat im postsowjetischen tadschikischen Kontext eine Reihe von Bedeutungen erlangt, die auf gewisse Weise eine Parallele zum lefebvrrianischen dreigeteilten Verständnis bei der Schaffung von Raum aufweist: „Remont“ als Wahrnehmung bezeichnet einen guten oder schlechten Zustand bei der Instandhaltung. „Remont“ als Konzept bezieht sich auf den Wunsch, einen bestimmten „remont“-Zustand zu erlangen. „Remont“ als Anwendung steht für eine Aktivität, die unternommen wird, um diesen Zustand zu erreichen. In dieser Hinsicht geht es bei „remont“ nicht ausschließlich darum, sich mit Mängeln zu beschäftigen, „remont“ ist vielmehr eine aktive Auseinandersetzung mit dem Raum, eine kulturell eingebettete kreative Vorgehensweise, die darauf abzielt, einen normativen Rahmen für räumliche Tugendhaftigkeit zu erreichen. Ich argumentiere dahingehend, dass das Konzept, an welchem sich „remont“ messen lassen muss, „obodi“ ist: von Menschen geschaffene Schönheit und Bewohnbarkeit. „Obodi“ wird im urbanen Raum Tadschikistans erst durch „remont“ ermöglicht. Als Vektor einer räumlichen Tugendhaftigkeit ist „remont“ eng mit den Ritualen des Lebenszyklus wie beispielsweise Beschneidungen, Hochzeiten und Bestattungen verbunden und damit Teil von Modernitäts-Projektionen und -Verhandlungen im postsowjetischen urbanen Zentralasien.*

Remont, Zentralasien, Tadschikistan, räumliche Tugendhaftigkeit, Lebenszyklen

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## Introduction

The peculiar notion of *remont* permeates the social production of space in Khujand and serves as backbone for the present article. The following account takes place in the city of Khujand, where the fieldwork for the present paper did take place in 2009 and 2010<sup>1</sup>. Located in the northern part of Tajikistan, on both banks of the Syrdarya River leaving the Ferghana Valley, Khujand has roughly 160.000 inhabitants, which makes it the country's second-largest city. On the southern shore of the Syrdarya, densely built-up quarters with an irregular street layout form Khujand's old town. The city's main institutions are located on both sides of the Lenin Street running north-south: the sprawling Panjshanbe bazaar and the city's main mosque; the central stadium and the administrative buildings at the riverside. After crossing the Syrdarya Bridge, Lenin Street runs uphill to the university campus, past the Ismoil Somoni statue, which came to replace the Lenin statue in 2011. The city used to bear Lenin's name from 1936 to 1992 and was called Leninabad in this period. On the northern bank, the city looks very much different: no more detached houses, no more crooked streets, but large housing estates consisting of prefabricated multi-storey houses from the Soviet period – the microrraions (for further details see SGIBNEV 2011 and SGIBNEV, forthcoming).

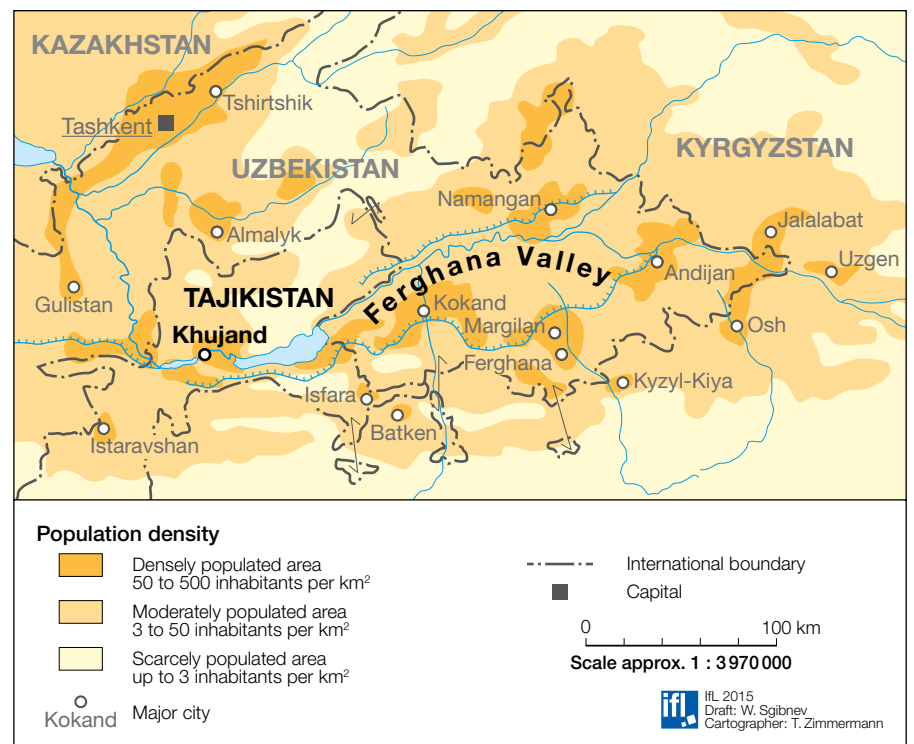
Khujand has been part of the Russian Empire since 1866, and, thanks to its early industrialisation, the cradle of virtually all leaders of the Tajik Republic in Soviet times. Tajik speakers form the majority of the city's population, yet the Uzbek language is frequently to be heard on the streets and bazaars, as well. With the onset of Soviet large-scale industrialisation since the 1930s, the population of Khujand rose dramatically. To the detriment of



Map 1: Location of Khujand within Central Asia

housing construction, the heavy industry was assigned a higher priority and housing construction did therefore by no means keep up with population growth (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2692). Only in the 1950s, cities

all over the Soviet Union witnessed the onset of an industrialised housing construction, which in Khujand led to the construction of microrraions on the right bank of the Syrdarya River. Nevertheless, the housing allocation system for the ne-



Map 2: Khujand agglomeration and the Ferghana Valley

1 The field research in Khujand, on which the present paper is based, was generously supported by the German National Academic Foundation. In Khujand, I collected roughly thirty lengthy biographical interviews and eighty mental maps, as well as additional information by means of participant observation and archive research. The present paper partly relies on literature and data described in more detail in the author's PhD thesis (SGIBNEV, forthcoming at the "Beiträge zur Regionalen Geographie" series).

wly built apartments was plagued by inefficiency and corruption (BROWN 1998, p. 614; GENTILE & SJÖBERG 2006, p. 710; BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2692). The waiting time for a state-allocated flat lasted for years – unless one matched specific conditions: being employed by the silk factory, for instance. Key industry enterprises continued to influence housing allocation (GENTILE 2003, pp. 5-6) (Map 1, 2).

After independence, Khujand faced a series of upheavals, which exacerbated the general economic downturn of post-socialist transition: The civil war (1992-1997) spared the city, yet public unrest was widespread well after the end of the civil war; most Russian-speakers have left the city. The privatisation of apartments, both of vacant ones, and of those inhabited by tenants, took place rather chaotically, since legislative acts were either insufficient or ignored. The factual closure of borders with neighbouring Uzbekistan from the late 1990s onwards, inflicted further damage on Khujand's economy. Only recently, stable road and electricity grid connection with the capital Dushanbe somewhat eased the city's deadlock. A significant part of the (male) work force gains its living as work migrants in Russia, and its remittances are of primordial importance for both subsistence and local economic development<sup>2</sup>.

This is the larger framework in which we will turn to discussing the notion of *remont*: The word came to the Russian language from French, where it originally meant the provisioning of horses to the cavalry. Understood as a completion of losses, *remont* began to mean in the Russian language all sorts of repair and upkeep activities. The notion of *remont* encompassed the repair of watches and cars, as well as renovation works in offices and apartments. In the Tajik language,

### Remont paralleling Henri Lefebvre's „trialectics“ of space production

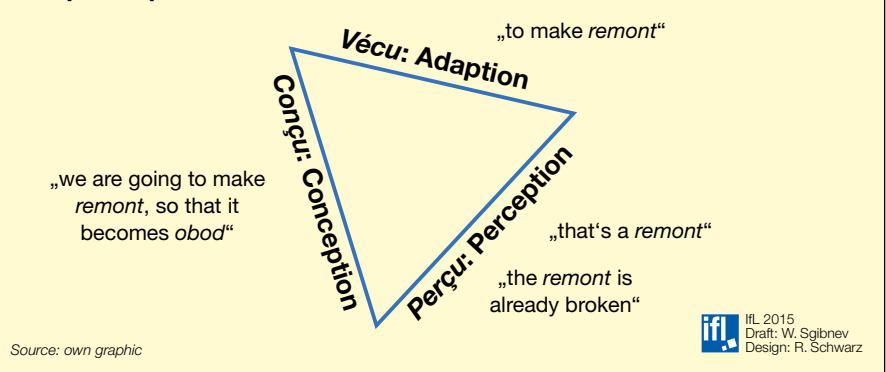


Fig. 1: Remont paralleling Henri Lefebvre's „trialectics“ of space production

age, *remont* has come to signify construction-related activities only<sup>3</sup>.

At least in Khujand, *remont* has acquired a number of meanings its Russian predecessor did not have. First of all, *remont* signifies a status, a condition. This can be a positive one and a negative one, too. With a friend, I passed by a long-abandoned building, and asking what it is, I got “In *remont* ast” (That’s a *remont*) as an answer (Interview KY). Yet in most cases, *remont* refers to the condition of good upkeep, past and present: “The *remont* (in that room) is already broken” (*Remont tam uže isportilsâ*) (Interview IB). The understanding of a broken *remont* leads to the desire to reach the wished status of *remont*. The activity to reach it, is called: to make *remont* – Tajik: *remont kardan*; Russian: *delat’ remont*: “You have to do *remont* everywhere” (Interview MF), “We will have to do a *fundamental remont*” (Interview IB). Ironically, perhaps, *remont* is the activity which transforms *remont* into *remont*:

“We had an old house but we made *remont* there. It’s a normal Tajik house, but now there is a *remont* like in Europe. [...] We have done all the *remont* already, it looks like new. But [...] we will do another *remont* when we have a wedding. Then we will renew the *remont* (magar tui nav mekunand, remonta nav mekunand).” (Interview KY)

*Remont* runs in some way parallel to the Lefebvrian three-piece understanding of production of space, which I would sum up as the interplay between conception, perception and adaptation of space. The three parts of a social production of space – conceptions, perceptions, and adaptations of space – are not isolated from each other. In the process of their interaction, space is being produced. They should not be understood as stand-alone segments, but as interwoven entities which re-enact the production of urban space in Khujand: *Remont* as perception refers to a good or a bad state of upkeep. *Remont* as conception refers to the desire to attain a certain *remont* status. *Remont* as adaptation refers to the activity being undertaken to reach this status (Fig. 1).

*Remont* is not only about attending to shortcomings, not about mending something broken, but is a culturally embedded creative practice. These multiple facets of the term characterise very well the production of space in Khujand – even if taken together, they are too disparate to possess an explanatory value. After a discussion of *remont* in light of theories of spatial adaptations, I am going to present *remont* as an arena of social negotiation of space production; secondly, its embeddedness in life-cycles; and, finally, the negotiation of modernity by means of a *remont* “European style”. In will conclude saying that the measure against which the need for *remont* is

<sup>2</sup> Remittances make up half of Tajikistan's BIP according to World Bank's Migration and Development Brief (World Bank 2009), which is the world's highest ratio.

<sup>3</sup> For petty repair works, the word *ta'mir* is used, such as in *ta'miri pojafzol* – shoe repair.



weighted, is, *obodi* – beauty and habitability created by men's hands, understood as a set of norms of a spatial morality. By means of *remont* – among others – *obodi* is being enacted in Khujand's urban space.

### The art of the possible: transduction in action

Soviet promises of modernity, as laid out in the ambitious planning documents, remained in part unfulfilled. This was surely due to the unexpected demise of the Soviet Union and the subsequent breakdown of the economy; but also to inherent inertia and frictional losses from the Soviet planning practice, which prioritised industry needs to the detriment of housing and infrastructure. The shortcomings of the planning process left many construction sites unfinished. Yet in the Soviet conception of space, also construction sites – and not the finished structures – stood by themselves as symbols of progress. They heralded “development as forever” (ALEXANDER, BUCHLI & HUMPHREY 2007, p. 51). Unfinished construction sites were therefore paradigmatic for the Soviet city, in the same way as on-going renovation and improvement works – the “eternal *remont*”. Following the Soviet anecdote – “I hope that in hell they will have an eternal fire and not an eternal *remont*” (Interview SV). *Remont*, as I observed it in the years after independence is therefore strongly rooted in a Soviet heritage.

Gerasimova argued that already the Soviet society could be described as a “society of *remont*”. Since the political and economic system was not conceived as an auto-regulating one, state authorities constantly made forays of “improvements, experiments and anti-crisis campaigns”. The citizens, too, contributed to this “society of *remont*”, either through low-key political activism within the allowed framework of grievances and petitions, but also on an everyday level, thorough adaptation of the material world around them (GERASIMOVA & ČUJKINA 2004). Looking at Central Asian societies via the prism of liminality allow to con-

ceive of them as ‘societies of *remont*’ as well. State authorities attempt to come by the permanent crisis through large-scale campaigns, which leads to unsustainable outcomes – such as the Roghun dam share frenzy or the Dushanbe trolleybus purchases (SGIBNEV 2014).

With this in mind, neither on the scale of the state or on the scale of a household, we should conceive of *remont* as a mere attending to shortcomings: Where change takes place, it takes place through practice, mirroring Lefebvre's claim of the pre-eminence of everyday practice for bringing about change. To Lefebvre, a study of the everyday life had to point to the “precise problems of production-at-large” and engage in a critical analysis of abundances, constraints and determinisms (LEFEBVRE 1968, p. 50). From a normatively translogical perspective, urban change in Central Asia appears as some kind of defectiveness which eventually gives way to “improvisations and short-term solutions”, which “have to fill the vacuum” (IFA-GALERIE 2009, p. 93). In my opinion, this point of view naïvely attributes to the “state” the capacity (and the will) to set out plans and norms, which benefit the urban population. It also devalues the aspirations and capacities of individual actors. From my observations in Khujand, their aspirations are by no means short-term, but guided by the will to sustainably improve their way of living. “Improvisation” falls short in describing actual capacities, which rely on an own logic of planning and implementation (BROWN 1998, p. 627). It needs therefore another framework to grasp the knife-edge between wishes and the limits to them.

Bouzarovski et al. have suggested the concept of *resilience* to analyse everyday coping strategies in post-socialist settings (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2690). They understood it as a “capacity to adapt” and an “ability of cities to transform their political, economic and technical structures in line with the demands of a more challenging future environment”, and proposed to conceive it in terms of a “complex network of socioeconomic practices and material sites”

(BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE, & GENTILE 2011, p. 2690). This concept takes into account the complex negotiation process and acknowledges the actors' room to manoeuvre. Yet adaptation is rather seen as a passive reaction to external impulses. This is consistent with a straightforward idea of *remont*: mending and repair indeed takes place when something is broken and needs to be fixed. Some spare part is being replaced, the *status quo ante* is being restored. Yet this stance does not acknowledge *remont* as a creative production of space in its own right.

This consideration brings to mind the process of transduction. Transduction, following Lefebvre's argument, “targets a virtual ‘object’ and its realization on a path heading toward a ‘pro-posed’ horizon. [...] *Proposing* does not amount to *producing*, but *propositions* open the way for those who will produce” (LEFEBVRE 2009, pp. 197-198). Transduction is therefore more than the “refashioning of urban space to meet the exigencies of the users” (PARKER 2004, p. 164), but a negotiation of the possibilities of the production of space: “As new theoretical imaginings are given concrete form, the feedback mechanism ensures that subsequent projections/projects are informed by this newly altered reality in an endless loop of speculation-investigation-critique-implementation” (PARKER 2004, p. 178). This practice is grounded in the local cultural context. In Lefebvre's terms, it can be framed as “a creative and expressive negotiation between the spatial affordance and the cultural significations” (STANEK 2011, p. 93). *Remont* appears in this sense as transduction in action, reflecting the dynamics between constraints and possibilities.

### *Remont* as social production of space

The creative practice of housing adaptations now comes into the focus of attention. This topic already stood at the forefront of Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space. Speaking of a housing estate in Bordeaux, he exclaims: “And what did the occupants do? Instead

of installing themselves in their containers, instead of adapting to them and living in them 'passively', they decided that as far as possible they were going to live 'actively'. In doing so they showed what living in a house actually is: an activity. They took what had been offered to them and worked on it, converted it, added to it" (STANEK 2011, p. 92).

Housing adaptations are therefore "a social and yet poetic act" (ARONOWITZ 2007, p. 147). These interpretations sound to me as a rejection of a purely functional understanding of housing as 'machines for living' – or, additionally as machines for educating the masses, as in the Soviet case.

*Remont* evidently comes into play, when speaking of technical maintenance. However, this technical aspect cannot be seen separately from social processes, since the management of real estate largely happens on a negotiated and day-to-day basis. The legislation stipulates that common premises – that is the roof, the staircase, heating and plumbing – are meant to be jointly managed by all owners. A new law on common ownership was adopted in July 2009 (REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN 2009), yet is hardly being implemented (TSŽ V TADŽIKISTANE 2010). In reality, the management of common premises does not abide by the law, at least not in Khujand. This lack of coordination results in a general neglect of common premises and in declining housing quality. Leaking roofs are one particularly salient issue. Iroda argues "You've got this problem in every house. In this flat which I bought, too, the roof is leaking. I was told already that I had to fix it myself. So I will start with the roof, and then go on to a *remont* of the apartment" (Interview IB). This case is common to other post-Soviet settings: As Bouzarovski et al. observed in Tbilisi, "the inability and unwillingness of most tenants to pay for repair and maintenance resulted in a rapid deterioration of almost all apartment buildings in the city" (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2693).

In this regard, the individual composition of a house or a staircase community

is decisive for negotiating on a necessary *remont*. Houses with a majority of apartment owners are managed in a distinctly different way than houses where many flats are rented out. Buildings with a majority of one- or two-rooms apartments generally suffer from a low degree of maintenance. These apartments do not suit the average extended family. The previous owners opted to buy larger apartments in the neighbourhood as 'Europeans' moved out, and to rent out the smaller apartments – either to students or to internal migrants, who refrain from large and long-term investments. At the same time, rapidly changing tenants do not cooperate in order to obtain better living conditions. In the staircase where I used to live in Khujand while on fieldwork, half of the flats were occupied by owners, the other half being rented out. On the first floor, all three flats were occupied by owners and had access to garden plots in the courtyard. Both smaller flats on the second floor were rented out to students, the larger flat was owner-occupied. On the third floor, one flat was rented out to students, while two adjacent flats were owner-occupied by an extended family. On the fourth floor, finally, two flats – a larger and a smaller one – were rented out, while one flat was owner-occupied. This owner though – a secluded and run-down middle-aged professor of mathematics – did not participate in house management affairs. With two apartments with frequently changing tenants and one eccentric professor, the fourth floor had no authority in the management of common premises, and had to live with leaking roofs and sordid plumbing. The inhabitants beneath were unimpressed if it rained through the roof, as long as those above collected the rainwater in buckets.

This example illustrates that microrailon neighbourhoods are mixed in terms of income and status. As Gentile argued, "socioeconomic differentiation is more likely to be reflected in segregation by housing tenure, quality and size rather than at the neighbourhood level" (GENTILE 2003, pp. 5-6), as this was the case in Soviet times already. The adjacent staircases are over-

whelmingly owner-occupied and therefore in a significantly better state of upkeep. Another reason for better management is the presence of 'natural' authorities – retired professors, politicians or sport champions who are able to convince the neighbours to contribute to common investments. As far as I was able to observe, such engagement was disinterested indeed, for neither of the 'authorities' lived on the upper floors and was directly threatened by leaking roofs. This underlines the importance of community structures and person-to-person negotiations on the neighbourhood level for the negotiation of space production through *remont*.

### **Remont in the rhythm of life-cycles**

The embeddedness in social structures is also true for *remont* within the privately-owned apartment. The massive construction programme of the Soviet era surely did produce a large amount of square metres, but the problem of overcrowding was at best only alleviated. The slight decline in Khujand's population after independence has barely suppressed the need for more housing: "In Soviet times it occurred in prefabricated houses that three families lived in a three-room apartment. But it's the same today. At a friend of mine's, there are seven people living in a two-room apartment, and he himself sleeps on the balcony" (Interview MF). This sentence witnesses not only the fact of a densely packed apartment, but also one solution which the inhabitants have attempted in order to expand the available living space: they transformed the balcony into an additional room.

Another motivation for individual housing changes is the fact that the apartment layouts were – intentionally – not well adapted to the customs of the persons who were meant to move in. The apartments were designed to support the emergence of nuclear families. After marriage, young couples were intended to move out to their own apartment, where they would be secured from their families' influence (STEPHAN 2010, p. 60). Th-



Photograph 1: Housing extension with loam: a bolo-hona ("on-top house") in Khujand's old town, Razzoq quarter, 2009 (Wladimir Sgibnev)

rough this support for *neolocality*, Soviet authorities intended to bring at least the younger generations in line with a common Soviet urban way of life. This aspiration was rooted in the conviction that space could be used as an instrument of education: "carefully designed living quarters (...) could eliminate the conditions for individualistic and *meshchanskie* (petty-minded bourgeois) ways of life, and on this basis a new human type would become the norm" (HUMPHREY 2005, p. 39). Still, most young couples do not have the opportunity to move to their own apartment – in Soviet times because housing construction did not keep pace with housing needs; and after independence because of a lack of money to buy an apartment. It is therefore not unusual for a young couple to stay in the apartment with the bridegroom's parents, which is not an easy task: "It is very difficult for the newly-wed in an apartment. Their private life must be kept" (Interview MF). In the old town *havli* (curtyard house), the solution would have been to build another room or another storey (Photograph 1), if the space and the means were available, yet the prefabricated concrete slabs of microrailon housing put an end to this practice.

The *havli* arrangement allows for a relative flexibility of the layout at a relative

low cost. Anyway, the house had to be strengthened or entirely rebuilt every decade or so due to its being built of loam. As rooms open to the courtyard and not necessarily to a corridor, another room can be stuck into the *havli*, where possible. Bakhtovar recalls his grandfather building a room on his own when his son – that is Bakhtovar's father – was four or five years of age, in 1894 (Interview SP). Bakhtovar himself built a room for himself and his family in the 1960s, but admits that it was of low-quality, because construction material was difficult to come by. The room which Bakhtovar's father built back then was since transformed into the living-room until it burnt down on New Year's eve 2008. The family decided to build a new structure on the site, this time of bricks and concrete, in order to provide a place for Bakhtovar's son and his family (Interview SP). This account shows the flexibility of the *havli*-type spatial arrangement. The space of the *havli* takes part in the family's life cycle and lives on together with its inhabitants, while the inhabitants actively live this space. Yet here as well, modern construction methods and fashions are about to preclude this flexibility for the future. The concrete structure built for Bakhtovar's son will surely last for a couple of decades. The other loam buildings

in the old town will also be replaced by more enduring structures. Those who can afford it, altogether build large mansions in the old town which rise three or four storeys. This surely provides enough comfortable living space for the extended family, but clamps the lid on the flexible and creative handling of living space, which was possible with loam structures.

In a microrailon, the adaptation of the apartment layout to the needs and aspirations of a family is more difficult. Yet in light of a largely unregulated legal environment, as we have seen above, it still can take many forms. Buying or renting an additional apartment is an evident remedy, but it is clearly affordable for higher incomes only. The emigration of Russian-speaking families in the early 1990s has allowed many families who decided to stay to buy apartments relatively cheaply<sup>4</sup>. It is therefore not very rare to see an extended family to occupying two or three apartments on the same floor or at least in the same staircase. With two or three apartments on one floor, all doors are generally kept open and the staircase space is being transformed to a *havli*-type arrangement. If the possibility of buying several apartments in one staircase is not available, moving would be another option. Still, this only rarely occurs in practice.

Real estate prices have considerably risen in Khujand over the last years, making it prohibitively expensive to move out into a larger apartment if the need arises. Furthermore, even if a real estate market does exist since Soviet times, the banking sector is embryonic (BROWN 1998, p. 614). Large parts of the population do not have access to any mortgage systems and therefore cannot ante up the required amounts of cash. Since the banking sector is underdeveloped and mistrusted, investments in one's own apartment is a common way to put surplus capital to service and to increase the apartment's value (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2702). In this

<sup>4</sup> I was told of prices of two or three thousand US\$ for four-rooms apartments in the attractive 18th or 19th microrailons.



vein, housing adaptations appear as a “material manifestation of alternative economic practices” (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2691).

Cultural factors also play a role in the decision to stay rather than to move. Bouzarovski et al. argue that “rural migrants prefer to stay and expand rather than move”, feeling a “strong emotional attachment to their homes and thus refused to move to other dwellings even if they had the financial capital to do so. Having adapted to their urban apartments, they preferred to increase their size and function, and inhabit them as extended families” (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2705). A further argument for the tendency to remain in the apartment is the high role of social capital in survival tactics. Round states that this “demonstrates the importance of place in everyday life as social capital flows through” (ROUND & WILLIAMS 2010, p. 188). Taking these arguments together, extensions to existing apartments are the most widespread answer to mitigate living space needs. Bouzarovski et al propose to understand this process as an alternative to residential mobility in the traditional sense (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, pp. 2690-2691). Inhabitants experience “multiple housing events without changing their residential location” in a context “where ‘non-market options’ play a key role in the progression of housing careers” (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2693).

In the context of apartments in large housing estates, balcony enclosures are the most widespread adaptation of the built environment. The existing concrete balcony casing is being extended up to the bottom of the following balcony. A row of materials is used for these purposes. An all-glass solution was more widespread in Soviet times, but is employed still today for smaller balconies too. Large balconies are often walled in with bricks of various sorts. Households with lower income might opt for plasterboard, corrugated iron sheets, wood or chipboard, although these are rather perceived



Photograph 2: Balcony enclosures reflect the owners' resources, 2010 (Wladimir Sgibnev)

as provisional arrangements. Bouzarovski et al. report that this practice was widespread in the Soviet Union since the 1960s (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2697). Then as today, state authorities tolerated these types of adaptations and did not request formal planning documents. Indeed, these adaptations came up to meet state aspirations – helping “to alleviate chronic housing shortages, while improving the living conditions of the population” (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2698). The extra room was often adapted as a kitchen – while the original kitchen which often was adjacent to the balcony was transformed to a living room. The living room, in turn, could then be transformed into a bedroom. Looking at examples from Skopje and Tbilisi, Bouzarovski et al argue that the additional living space did not serve as bedrooms, because of difficulties into intro-

ducing heating to the extensions (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & Gentile 2011, p. 2703) (Photograph 3).

In Khujand though, I have regularly witnessed another arrangement when the enclosed balcony is used as the men's living part. At times, it is shared with one of the sons. On very rare occasions I have encountered the enclosed balcony as being used as the women's part – the argument was its being next to the kitchen. Provided the enclosed balcony is on the first floor, it is also possible to transform it into a small kiosk. Then it would require an additional staircase from the street level. Additional entrances are possible up to the second or third floor if commercial space needs to be made accessible. Apartments located on the first floor at times have the opportunity to expand greatly beyond the original balconies and to add dozens of square metres to the surface with the help of additional walls



and extra roofing. In contrast with the capital Dushanbe, I did not encounter this practice on a widespread basis, and if, then almost exclusively for commercial purposes. The possibility to engage in urban agriculture is more important than the need for additional living space, as it seems.

Multi-storey building extensions on frames of steel or reinforced concrete, as can be found in the South Caucasus or on the Balkans, did not come to my eyes in Khujand. This absence might possibly be linked to seismic hazards, as the extensions considerably affect the static of the original buildings. Yet already minor extensions such as balcony enclosures can have an adverse effect on living quality. They might obstruct ventilation and introduce mould and moisture to the apartments. But the biggest issue are problems with DIY-adaptations to plumbing and isolation. Iroda recalls: "My neighbour is flooding me regularly. Something is broken at her place and water seeps down to my balcony. Every time I go to her and tell her that she has to fix it (*čtoby sdelala remont*), but she tells me: 'I don't have any money'. Her husband is somewhere, working, and she doesn't have sons. Well, I can't pressure her. I don't know. I live with it. I have done some repair work at my balcony, but it didn't help (*Â delala remont, no on uže isportilsâ*) [...]. The problem is that she has transferred her kitchen to the balcony and apparently something was not done the right way. Now, water seeps through. Whatever I do, it doesn't work" (Interview IB).

Adaptations of the built environment come in a plethora of variants and styles. Yet as a matter of fact, the apartment extensions do not match the style and colours of the original apartment buildings. All individual balconies combined on one façade transform the previously monolithic blocks into a mosaic of sometimes sloppy and sometimes affectionate workmanship and decoration. These extensions come as signs of social status (BOUZAROVSKI, SALUKVADZE & GENTILE 2011, p. 2706), but also of individual taste. When asked why he painted his bal-

cony in a bright yellow, Murodali exclaimed "There are no comrades when it comes to taste and colour!" (*Na vkus i cvet tovariša net*), and the shoemaker sided with him: "This cheerful colour is there, because grandpa is a cheerful guy himself!" (Interview SP). POPESCU has argued that this "patchworks of diverse patterns" is an expression of a "yearning for individualization, combined with a progressive social demarcation" which reduces architecture to "the role of a support mechanism" (POPESCU 2010, p. 188). I would not go that far toward this interpretation. I do rather see them as answers to precise practical needs and as attempts to fulfil aspirations. Coping appears here to be more important than self-fulfilment. In this regard, I would support ALEXANDER & BUCHLI who sum up that while "a new uniformity is emerging where it is hard to distinguish the house and lifestyle of the 'new Buryat' from that of a 'new Kazakh' [...], the lives of the poor and methods of 'getting by' [...] are more distinct" (ALEXANDER, BUCHLI & HUMPHREY 2007, p. 33). The described examples of *remont* such as building extensions are, I would argue, by no means less important than "Starchitecture" (BASTEN 2009, p. 7). They emerge as spatialised expressions of culturally embedded household coping strategies.

### **Evroremont: negotiating modernity**

In the previous section we have witnessed *remont* as an activity intrinsically tied to life-cycles. Yet while building extensions should accommodate the housing needs of an enlarged family, *remont* should also accommodate the needs of the family's representation in front of the community. This is where the notion of *obod* comes in. Looking at the origins of the word, the Encyclopaedia Iranica indicates its origin in the Middle Persian *âpât*, meaning "developed, thriving, inhabited, cultivated". This is followed by the contemporary definition of the word meaning "inhabited space" or "any place where a group of individuals has come together and erected dwellings for itself" (ENCYCLOPÆDIA IRA-

NICA 1982). The Tajik adjective *obod* refers in the same way to a set of positive qualities ascribed to a particular space: beautiful, well maintained, blossoming – both literally and figuratively, and is closely related to ideas of modernity and representativity. The country, the city, as well as the private home should appear as state of the art. This goes for apartments in multi-storey blocks as well as for *havlis*:

"The house was built one hundred and fourteen years ago. From raw loam bricks. And it still stands, thank God. But from the outside you would not say that the house is more than hundred years old. The façade is done in the modern way, all around the courtyard. It's plastered and painted, the best *remont*. No one could say if it's made from burnt bricks or from raw bricks" (Interview SP). Through the practice of *remont*, the wish for *obod*-ness is particularly articulated on the occasion of life-cycle rituals (Photograph 4).

"It is advisable to do *remont* before weddings, so that everything looks decent (*prilično*), that is *obod*, one would say, (*obod ki šavad, meguând*) when people come courting or for the celebration. The rooms where the guests come in must be spacious, well-lit, not moist or anything. With windows to the east, if possible [...]. In prefab houses, you choose one of the rooms, but you have to do *remont* everywhere, because people pass through the entire apartment" (Interview MF).

There is no discussion whether *remont* must precede a major life-cycle celebration. It appears as a logical consequence: "My wife says: we've got a son to marry. So I go and make *remont*" (Interview NT).

The equipment necessary for *remont* and construction work can be easily bought in Khujand. Currently, plasterboard is a favourite material for a *remont*, "as it should be" (*kak nado*) (Interview MI). It is cheap, versatile, easy to work and easy to paint. It serves to subdivide rooms, but also to produce elaborate suspended ceilings with discrete background lighting. There is a handful of de-



Photograph 3: Example of a evroremont of the early 1990s, 2009 (Wladimir Sgibnev)

licated bazaars in the city, and the choice is very large. Nevertheless it's an expensive enterprise:

"At Jum'a-Bozor there you find wall colours and lustres. At Guliston, you have almost no colours, but instead you have plastic and armstrong<sup>5</sup>, and you also have pipes. If you need long ones, you get them only at Guliston. Or perhaps on the road to Unji, there might also be some. But it's expensive. You don't have factories here; colours always come from abroad. You have a candy factory, or vodka, then you have juices and carpets at Qayroqqum. You also have plastic windows and doors there, since recently. But the machines they have to buy abroad, so it's expensive" (Interview KY).

The *remont* expenses surely increase the cost of the wedding. These expenses are not regulated by the newly adopted law on conspicuous consumption (ROCHE & HOHMANN 2011, p. 121), which prescribes the maximum number of guests per ritual and the associated expenses. *Remont*, therefore, might increase in order to boast the family's reputation when

other expenses are curtailed (Interview MF). Yet regardless of all expenses, *remont* only addresses the surface of things and not to their essence, and therefore cannot solve all problems: "At times there are simply unlucky rooms. *Remont* does not help against the evil eye; even a *mushkulkushod*<sup>6</sup> can't help" (Interview MF).

Apart from representational purposes for life cycle rituals, *remont* also refers to a quest for modernity. Contrary to the capital Dushanbe, there was little construction activity going on in Khujand. The houses that were being constructed, though, are strongly rooted in Soviet styles and techniques. Two multistorey buildings recently joined Khujand's micro-raions, but both are structural copies of Soviet housing series of the 1980s, somewhat refined in their outer appearance with the help of plastic and aluminium panels. Architectural 'modernity' with its glass façades is very slow to arrive in Khujand. Meanwhile, the desire for modernity finds its expression on the intimate level of the household. On every noticeboard in town, you would find advertisements for firms, which propose *evroremont* – best quality at the best price. This term defies a precise definition: the already broad range of possible meanings of *remont* is joined by all possible connotation of its allegedly 'European' character. Akpar wonders: "I don't even know where this word came from [...] Perhaps in Europe too, people do this kind of *remont* as well. Perhaps?" (Interview AD). The expression emerged in the early 1990s. Ex-Soviet middle classes, wary of the meagre offerings in hardware and construction material they were used to (BORÉN & GENTILE 2007, pp. 97-98), crushed on newly available Western imports (DANILENKO 2011). Some years later, *evroremont* had conquered Tajikistan:

"We did not have plastic windows previously. You didn't have a choice. Everyone had wooden windows, like standard wooden windows, because there weren't

any companies which would produce plastic ones. But now, there are some. And the price is the same" (Interview AD).

Labour migrants working on Russian construction sites brought those materials to Central Asia. They spread the newest interior design fashions with the help of printed catalogues that widely circulate in Khujand. I saw Mavluda arguing about colours and designs proposed in a catalogue with her colleagues at work in a copy shop. When I asked her, she told of having a pile of these catalogues at home, spending her evenings flipping through them (Interview MP). She has married recently and is about to choose the design for their bedroom. Her favourite is a suspended ceiling in a heart-shaped form painted red against a pink background, with, of course, indirect lighting installed behind the plasterwork.

Among the emerging middle classes, the choice of designs and colours is, as far as I have experienced, generally done by women. Their accounts have a sincere feeling of pride in common: "the colours and the lustres, I have chosen them myself. You like it?" (Interview GR). The dominance of women does also work for enforcing less elaborate designs:

"But I don't want any of these modern things. (Although) my husband loves it. (In the old apartment) he has built some plasterboard walls, some ornaments, but I don't want. I said 'stop', and it stopped there. We will just hang some wallpaper or paint the walls and do the floors. That's all. I just want to move in quickly" (Interview IB).

Khurshed occasionally did some odd jobs at construction sites. He is a great fan of *Evroremont* and could speak endlessly of the various possibilities it offers:

"Evroremont in the Soviet Union, it was just colours on the walls. The painter came and put the colours on the wall, then the colours went away and you coloured anew. This was the old remont (Photograph 4). (But now) you buy spackle for the surface, you buy the colours, you buy the armstrong and then you work with all that. It takes a lot of time, one month at least. So they do re-

5 Armstrong designates a mineral fibre panel used for suspended ceiling and, rarely, walls. Pennsylvania-based Armstrong World Industries is a major producer of this material.

6 A religious ritual practised by a group of women in order to provide solutions for difficult situations in life



Photograph 4: Old interior remont in an old town havli, 2014 (Wladimir Sgibnev)

mont, spackle the surface, they lay the skirting board, and this will be an evroremont. And they might want to put armstrong sheets, or Al Capone<sup>7</sup> sheets, or tiles" (Interview KY).

Indeed, compared to the Soviet era, when wall colours and lime plaster were the only available materials (DEJHINA 2005, p. 81) – and they were already hard to come by, the wide range of material available appears today as a promise of modernity. Khurshed also helped in doing *evroremont* for his own house, bringing it in line with a perceived European modernity. He, too, sees *remont* as being a necessary and unavoidable part of a housing career, embedded in life cycles:

"We had an old house but we made remont there. It's a normal Tajik house, but now there is a remont like in Europe. We have *evroremont* now, you understand. [...] It's a Finnish house and we have done all the remont already, it looks like new. But [...] we will do another remont when we have a wedding. Then we will renew the remont (magar tui nav mekunand, re-

montro nav mekunand). So, here the *evroremont* is done (already), but we still have a house in Dehmoy, where my grandmother lives and my uncle, we will make it *obod* there too" (ingō obod mekunem ham) (Interview KY).

Together with construction business, *remont* has become a major part of Tajik economy. Fuelled by remittances and skills of labour migrants, *Evroremont* goes on and on. When one house is ready, the next one must follow. And when a wedding lies ahead, a new *remont* is on its way. It seems as if *remont* has become an integral part of an informally transmitted Tajik identity: "Tajiks all work at *Evroremont*. It's a job (*professîâ*) which is called *evroremont*. You can't learn it in school, you just do it" (Interview KY).

### Conclusion

This paper looked at the production of social space through the lens of spatial adaptations. In this field actors engage and compete in the production of space. They are all bound by constraints and guided by wishes. From a Lefebvrian perspective, I understand this as transduction in action. On the household level, families were confronted with housing shortages – both in quantity and quality. Guided by the idea of possible alternatives, they employed spatial strategies in order to improve living conditions. The inhabitants' involvement and enthusiasm

shows the importance of analysing adaptations processes when looking at social space production.

The ubiquitous, historically embedded, socially negotiated and culturally meaningful practice of *remont* allows us to qualify Central Asian society as 'societies of *remont*'. In this Central Asian case study, the Soviet-era "development as forever" (ALEXANDER, BUCHLI, & HUMPHREY 2007, p. 51) has met local transient loam-based architectures and life-cycle rituals in order to produce societies engaged in 'eternal *remont*'. In accord with a Soviet saying, *remont* is nothing that can be stopped; it can only pause for lack of available funding (Interview SV). However, liminality should not be equated with defectiveness, but serve as an entry point into an analysis of local logics of space production.

This logic is being negotiated in a community context, as shown by the constant importance of *obod*-ness. At the household level, *obod*-ness is achieved, as we have seen, through the practice of *remont*. Life cycle rituals are a major factor in perpetuating community and are central occasions for adaptations of space. In this light, *evroremont* appears as a meaningful cultural practice, as a negotiation of identity on the household level. Questions of modernity arise in the same way, as was the case with modern wedding dresses – the *evromoda* (MCBRIEN 2006, p. 341). Yet even for traditional or conservatively Islamic weddings, there is no question of renouncing *evroremont* in the apartment – for the sake of the *obodi* it brings about. Housing adaptation are therefore powerful vehicles for experiencing the "possibility of a difference, without prescribing what this difference should be. It is consumption of space that conveys a hunch of an everyday beyond the society of consumption" (STANEK 2011, p. 128).

The mechanisms of spatial adaptations described in the paper are, by virtue their embeddedness in local history and local practices, specific to a particular urban setting in Central Asia. Yet Tajikistan, being torn between a Soviet promise of an industrialised modernity, an ideality-

7 It took me a lot of time to figure out where the word Al Capone came from and what it originally meant. It is a kind of a metal sheet covering the façades of almost every new or newly renovated public or business building. Every child knows that this sheet is called Al Capone. Only by accident I stumbled upon the origin of the term: 'Alucobond' was the leading brand of this kind of material. On European construction sites, the material might be known as 'Aluminium composite panel', or 'sandwich panel'. It is a lightweight and resistant cladding material consisting of a polyethylene core sandwiched between two aluminium sheets, which comes in a variety of colours and forms



pic “oriental city”, and current projections of modernity based on work migrants’ experiences in Moscow, Astana or Dubai, is, in this light, a comparative venture in itself. The negotiations of modernity by means of *remont* therefore give way to a larger discussion on the global issue of a “do-it-yourself-urbanism” which is salient well beyond this particular case.

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## Quoted Interviews (2009-2010)

AD, GR, IB, KY, MI, MF, MP, NT, SP, SV

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## Резюме

Владимир Сгибнев

### Ремонт: Изменение жилища как практика производства пространства в постсоветском Таджикистане

Настоящая работа посвящена различным аспектам понятия «ремонт» и в этой связи анализирует проблематику производства городского пространства в современном Таджикистане. Термин «ремонт» в контексте постсоветского Таджикистана приобрёл ряд значений, которые в определённом смысле параллельны тройственному пониманию производства пространства Анри Лефевра. «Ремонт», как восприятие, имеет отношение к хорошему или плохому состоянию объекта. «Ремонт», как концепт, связан со стремлением достижения соответствующего состояния. «Ремонт», как практика, означает деятельность, которая осуществляется для достижения данного состояния. В связи с этим при «ремонте», речь не идёт исключительно об исправлении недостатков, но в большей степени означает взаимодействие с пространством, культурно ориентированный креативный подход, направленный на достижение нормативного уровня пространственной морали. Исходя из этого утверждается, что концепт, с которым сопоставляется необходимость «ремонта» – это т.н. «ободи», рукотворная красота и благоустройство, что в городах Таджикистана достигается с помощью «ремонта». Как вектор пространственной морали «ремонт» тесно связан с ритуалами жизненного ритма, такими как обрезание, свадьба и похороны, и тем самым проецируется на тенденции и взаимодействия модернизации на постсоветских урбанизированных территориях Центральной Азии.

*Ремонт, Центральная Азия, Таджикистан, пространственная мораль, жизненные ритмы*

## Résumé

WLADIMIR SGIBNEV

### Remont: Adaptation du habitat comme pratique de production de l'espace dans le Tadjikistan post-soviétique

L'article proposé aborde les nombreuses facettes de la notion *remont* en explorant la production d'espaces urbains dans le Tadjikistan contemporain. Dans le contexte tadjik post-soviétique, le terme *remont* a donné naissance à de nombreuses significations, qui, d'une certaine manière, reviennent à l'idée de la triplicité de l'espace selon Lefebvre: *remont* dans le sens de perception fait référence à un bon ou mauvais état d'entretien. *Remont* dans le sens de conception fait référence au désir d'atteindre un certain statut *remont*. *Remont* dans le sens d'adaptation fait référence à l'activité réalisée pour atteindre ce statut. À cet égard, *remont* n'est pas seulement le fait de pallier les lacunes, cette notion couvre de manière active le sujet de l'espace et constitue une pratique créative ancrée dans la culture, visant à atteindre un ensemble de norme de moralité spatiale. Je soutiens que la mesure prise pour pondérer le besoin de *remont* est *obodi* – la beauté et l'habitabilité créées par les mains de l'homme. Moyennant la notion de *remont*, *obodi* est en cours d'adoption dans les espaces urbains du Tadjikistan. Vecteur spatial de moralité, *remont* est intimement lié aux rituels de cycle de vie tels que les circoncisions, les mariages et les funérailles, et participe ainsi aux projections et aux négociations de modernité dans les zones urbaines post-soviétiques de l'Asie centrale.

Remont, Asie centrale, Tadjikistan, moralité spatiale, cycles de vie